



## **WHY THIS WORK MATTERS.**

### **CREATING A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH TO OUTREACH WITH MARGINALIZED YOUTH**

When working with young people from marginalized situations, it is imperative to understand that we cannot reach everyone with a one-size-fits-all approach. Many youth have experienced untold trauma in their lives in which they have had no control over. They simply were born into situations that were inherited to them through no choice of their own. Situations of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; Situations of neglect; Situations of fatherlessness and abandonment. Each of these and more play critical factors into forming the child into the developing teenager that will carry trauma eventually into adulthood. If we cannot have wisdom in this area, we run the risk of completely missing the opportunity to create real and meaningful change in their lives while they are in such a precarious time.

Their behaviour will be different based on what they have experienced. We need to understand this. This will require extraordinary patience. For young people who have experienced less trauma and have come from a more stable home environment, they may be less disruptive, show more respect and have higher emotional intelligence. None of these things should determine our level of care for the teenager who has endured more trauma and may exhibit more difficult outward behaviour. We need to show consistency and patience in our ministry to them, because more than anything they need people who will not abandon them, but will continue to walk through life with them and understand that their behaviour is a direct result of the trauma they have experienced.

### **CREATING A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH TO OUTREACH WITH MARGINALIZED YOUTH**

Lately, some of the most exciting research has come out about this very thing and it perfectly lines up with what we at Youth Rise are trying to accomplish as we specifically go into some of the most broken neighbourhoods and seek out youth who have experienced brokenness as we endeavour to bring hope and healing.

# THE ACES STUDY

A few years ago I was at a community crime prevention meeting with the City of Edmonton and someone presented the ACEs study. I couldn't believe that I had never heard of this before. As I sat in this meeting something clicked within me, and the two worlds that I knew of outreach with marginalized youth and Christian ministry were tied together in such a tangible way.

The Term ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) comes from a 1998 study between Kaiser Permanente in San Diego and the CDC (United States Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention). It was "one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess connections between chronic stress caused by early adversity and long-term health." Over 17,000 patients were part of the initial study.

"The study examined exposure to childhood adversity, including abuse and neglect, and household dysfunction like domestic violence, parental mental illness, or parental substance abuse. Researchers assigned an "ACE score" to each participant by adding up the number of adversities the participant reported."

**In the official ACE study 10 types of childhood trauma were measured. 5 personal questions and 5 questions related to family dynamics. The following questions were asked:**

## Prior to your 18th birthday:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?</b><br/>No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___</li> <li>2. <b>Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?</b></li> <li>3. <b>Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?</b></li> <li>4. <b>Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?</b></li> <li>5. <b>Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?</b></li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. <b>Were your parents ever separated or divorced?</b></li> <li>7. <b>Was your mother or stepmother: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?</b></li> <li>8. <b>Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?</b></li> <li>9. <b>Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?</b></li> <li>10. <b>Did a household member go to prison?</b></li> </ol> <p><b>Now add up your "Yes" answers: _ This is your ACE Score</b></p> <p>-----</p> |
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The results of this study were staggering.

- 13% of all people who took part in the study had an ACE score of 4 or higher
- 67% of all people had at least one ACE

**"It would reveal that adverse experiences in childhood were very common, even in the white middle-class, and that these experiences are linked to every major chronic illness and social problem that the United States grapples with – and spends billions of dollars on."**

So if you had significant Trauma and a higher ACE score in your childhood you are statistically

- More likely to have mental health issues
  - More likely to be incarcerated
  - More likely to have relational problems
  - More likely to have difficulty in school
  - More likely to struggle with substance abuse and addiction
- BUT also because of the toxic stress in the brain and body
- More prone to medical conditions like **cancer, heart disease, depression, and anxiety!**

**These findings are unprecedented. The effects of childhood trauma, when untreated cause undue damage on the individual well into their adult years.**

San Francisco paediatrician Dr. Nadine Burke Harris describes succinctly what happens to the body and how it can have such long standing effects. She says,

“if you’re in a forest and see a bear, a very efficient fight or flight system instantly floods your body with adrenaline and cortisol and shuts off the thinking portion of your brain that would stop to consider other options. This is very helpful if you’re in a forest and you need to run from a bear. **The problem is when that bear comes home from the bar every night;**

If a bear threatens a child every single day, his emergency response system is activated over and over and over again. He’s always ready to fight or flee from the bear, but the part of his brain – the prefrontal cortex – that’s called upon to diagram a sentence or do math becomes stunted, because, in our brains, emergencies – such as fleeing bears – take precedence over doing math.”

If patients had an ACE score of 3 or higher “their odds of having learning or behaviour problems in school were 32 times as high as kids who had no adverse childhood experiences.”

## How does it effect the BRAIN?

Children with toxic stress live much of their lives in fight, flight or fright (freeze) mode. They respond to the world as a place of constant danger. With their brains overloaded with stress hormones and unable to function appropriately, they can't focus on learning. They fall behind in school or fail to develop healthy relationships with peers or create problems with teachers and principals because they are unable to trust adults. Some kids do all three. With despair, guilt and frustration pecking away at their psyches, they often find solace in food, alcohol, tobacco, methamphetamines, inappropriate sex, high-risk sports, and/or work and over-achievement. They don't regard these coping methods as problems. Consciously or unconsciously, they use them as solutions to escape from depression, anxiety, anger, fear and shame.

**As a Christian minister this breaks my heart.**

**These are lost souls. They are not just problems and nuisances of society. They are kids who have been battered and bruised by a very cruel world. If not surrounded by love, care and mentorship they will most likely stay caught in a cycle and perpetuate the brokenness.**

If the ACEs study ended here it would seem utterly hopeless. It would almost seem like 'why even try?' If the toxic stress of childhood trauma left young people so scarred that it was irreversible and there was no silver lining in all this, then despair would truly set in amongst those who saw these broken kids and had compassion on them.

**But the study also found something incredible.**

**According to research about childhood trauma, all of the risk factors for adverse experiences can be offset by one thing: the presence of a stable, caring adult in a child's life.**

This is absolutely earth shattering! A stable caring adult can help a young person navigate through life and build resilience to help deal with the hardships of trauma. It will by no means eliminate the history of what happened in that child's life, but it can provide a means forward and shift the narrative for them where they can learn to process and deal with the trauma. It can be an anchor point in the midst of a storm.

Without the presence of a caring and supportive adult presence, the research is grim.

W. Thomas Boyce, M.D. from the University of California San Francisco says that "The key active core ingredient to building resilience are the relationships the kids have to others that care about them."

This would most often be family, but not always as Harvard professor Jack P. Shonkoff states;

"Of course families play a very important role, but nobody raises children in isolation. We have a huge amount of research to show the powerful impact of teachers, coaches, other adults in the community with whom children have a chance to develop relationships who play that critical supportive role in building resilience."

## WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL STEPS WHEN DOING TRAUMA INFORMED MINISTRY TO MARGINALIZED YOUTH?

- 1) **HAVE THICK SKIN.** Chances are you will get offended in some way working with these students. You may get sworn at; You may get made fun of; You may get ignored; They might not listen or behave like you think they should in your programs. I cannot tell you how many times over the years working with this demographic all of these things have happened to me and more. You cannot take any of it personal. Remember that their behaviour is almost always a reflection of their circumstance. This does not mean you do not have boundaries or discipline, just don't take things personal. If your skin becomes soft, you wont last in this work.
- 2) **HAVE A SOFT HEART.** Likewise, if your heart becomes hard, you wont last either. Always have a soft heart. Always lead with love and compassion. Remember why you do this work. Regularly seek to deepen your relationship with Jesus through prayer, meditation and the reading of the word. Regularly try and practice the art of empathy. Allow yourself to go beyond the behaviour and pain and see the person. This will ensure your heart is full of compassion. This is vital.
- 3) **RECOGNIZE ITS A LONG GAME.** Set your expectations from the start. If you expect to come in and change lives in a month, even a year then you are in the wrong field. It took me nearly 6 months in one area of ministry to even get some of the youth to start to trust that I was an adult that wasn't going to just up and leave them like so many others in their lives. Ministry, especially to high trauma youth is a marathon, not a sprint. Be patient though, because you will see incredible life transformation over time, and that is worth the trouble.
- 4) **BE SENSITIVE TO THE SPIRITUAL SPECTRUM.** Recognize that every marginalized young person will be at different places on the spiritual spectrum. While we as leadership embrace a Jesus based life and know that fulfillment comes from this, be ok with where everyone else is at. Don't force anything on anyone that they are not ready for. Be ok with this. Allow spiritual conversations to happen in their own time while being sensitive to cultural and religious backgrounds of those you reach out to. Those seeking true spiritual hunger will find it and will see the joy and life that you and your team have through your faith in Jesus.
- 5) **STRENGTH IN NUMBERS.** You need a team. You cannot possibly think to do this work as a lone ranger. Surround yourself with gifted and passionate teammates who will be able move the vision and mission forward of working with high trauma youth. If you think you can do this alone or even with a handful of people, you will be packing it in before you know it.
- 6) **PARTNER AND REFER.** Just as you need a team surrounding you as you move forward in ministry, you need to understand your limitations and how you are only stronger through partnership with other organizations. Groups like local police, schools, city employees, social workers, other non-profits, churches and other religious groups will all be vital to your success with high trauma youth. In the same breath, know when something is above your area of expertise and refer. We are not doctors, psychologists, police, or social workers. We are caring, consistent Christian adults in the lives of these youth. But we can give them access to those individuals.



**This is scientific research that makes the Gospel come to life!** As believers we can extend the gift of presence and compassion to those who have endured so much pain. We can make a difference! The research is there!

We are told in Scripture some crucial things about caring for those in our society who are marginalized.

- **In the book of James 1:27 the author states that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress”**
- **We are told in Proverbs 31:8-9 to “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.”**
- **1 Samuel 2:8 says “(the Lord) raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour.”**

It is in God’s character to see his broken children rise out of their circumstance and he wants to use caring adults to provide support to make this happen.

We created YOUTH RISE to see this massive issue of marginalized youth in our city with no hope and to offer them a chance to RISE above their circumstances into their full potential of what they were created for. All of our programs are created through the lens of mentorship to young people. If mentorship doesn’t happen in a program in some form, it’s probably not worth doing. This will be true for youth drop ins, sports teams we coach, lunch programs, resume workshops, tutoring; all of these things are supported by mentorship of a caring adult to a young person.

All of the research says that without a stable and caring adult in the life of a high trauma youth, their future will look grim. They will be more likely to live a life where they will be more prone to a gamut of social and behavioural problems, as well as physical and mental health problems.

We see ourselves as standing in the gap saying we see a better future for these youth. The why of our organization is **“Youth in difficult circumstances hold intrinsic God-given value. We endeavour to help establish life giving communities and resources to ensure a better future for them.”**

We know there are caring and compassionate adults willing to partner and invest in them to see this future come to pass. Where they once could have been some of our city’s greatest menaces or burdens, they now could have the capacity to become our city’s greatest leaders; and to breath life and love into the next generations and break the cycles of brokenness and pain.

Caring and compassionate adults everywhere can play a vital role in helping Youth Rise. By partnering with us in 2 ways you can help ensure that these marginalized youth are able to have a stable and caring adult in their life.

- **We need the best mentors and leaders this city has to offer. Caring adults willing to invest relationally.**
- **We need willing donors to play the crucial role of investing finances and laying the foundational structure in supporting the volunteers, programs, and staff to do this crucial work.**

Together you are the heroes that will help youth rise in our city.

## Resources

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